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San Jose landmark project down to these three choices

Urban Confluence Silicon Valley unveils finalists, with winner to be chosen in 2021

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The quest to create a new landmark structure in downtown San Jose reached a major milestone Friday night when three designs were revealed as the finalists during a virtual event that included some surprises of its own.

But perhaps the biggest surprise is how much each of the finalists capture the innovative, imaginative and fun spirit of this place where we live.





“Welcome to Wonderland,” which was created by Rish Saito and pays tribute to “Alice in Wonderland,” was announced on Friday, Sept. 18, 2020, as one of the finalists in Urban Confluence Silicon Valley’s search for a new landmark for San Jose. (Courtesy Urban Confluence Silicon Valley)

“They’re really different in their vision, their inspiration,” said Jon Ball, a retired executive with construction firm Hensel Phelps who is chairman of the Urban Confluence Silicon Valley board and served on the 14-person jury. “All three have a certain elegance and poetry.”

Here are the final three, as chosen from 963 submissions by a jury of artists, architects, civic leaders and environmentalists. (Watch videos about each finalist below and get more information at www.urbanconfluencesiliconvalley.org).

- “Nebula Tower,” designed by Quinrong Liu and Ruize Li, a 180-foot high framework cube that includes a negative space representing the San Jose Light Tower, a symbol that has been the city’s phantom icon for more than a century. The tower can be illuminated at night in a variety of patterns.
- “Breeze of Innovation,” by Fer Jerez and Belen Perez de Juan of SMAR Architecture Studio, uses 500 lithe, white rods that move gently in the wind and represent Silicon Valley’s innovative companies. It, too, includes a reference to the Light Tower — a conical void within the rods in the same dimensions as the original structure.





A rendering of “Nebula Tower,” designed by Quinrong Liu and Ruize Li, a 180-foot high framework cube that was announced on Sept. 18, 2020, one of the finalists for Urban Confluence Silicon Valley’s search for a new San Jose landmark. (Courtesy Urban Confluence Silicon Valley)

- “Welcome to Wonderland,” created by Rish Saito, is something else entirely. A riff on “Alice in Wonderland” with ribbon of artificial flora finished in white plaster that “grows” out of a 700-foot long container. At night, projection mapping turns the structure into a vibrant, colorful display that people can walk through. The point, Saito says, is to honor the imagination that drives Silicon Valley.

Urban Confluence Silicon Valley grew out of a desire to replicate the iconography of the San Jose Light Tower, a 207-foot-high structure made of iron pipe and hoops that was erected on Santa Clara Street in 1881 and stood until 1915 when the weakening tower collapsed on itself following a storm. But realizing there was little appetite for a replica — a half-size version already exists at History Park on Senter Road — the worldwide ideas competition was opened up to any design that would represent the spirit of San Jose and Silicon Valley.

“Even though we were originally inspired by the Light Tower, we were in no way prescriptive about that,” Ball said. “As it turns out, the non local jurors were the ones very much fascinated by the idea of an homage to the old tower. For me, that was a big surprise.”



The jury, which included people as far away as the East Coast and Europe, met virtually for two days in early August. A rigorous discussion took place once the submissions were narrowed down to about a dozen, and jurors began jockeying for their favorites. Interestingly, none of the finalists was among the 47 submissions recommended by a larger Community Competition Panel that met in July.



“Breeze of Innovation,” by Fer Jerez and Belen Perez de Juan of SMAR Architecture Studio, was announced on Friday, Sept. 18, 2020, as one of the finalists in Urban Confluence Silicon Valley’s search for a new landmark in San Jose. (Courtesy Urban Confluence Silicon Valley)

Friday night’s online reveal party was intended not only to unveil the finalists, but to also get the community — and potential donors — excited about the project. While the cost of final selection won’t be known for months, Urban Confluence Silicon Valley knows it will have a fundraising challenge ahead of it.

During the online event, Phil Boyce of the Valley Foundation pledged a \$100,000 matching grant to the project, and Adobe Systems — the largest tech company with a downtown San Jose headquarters — served as the virtual event’s presenting sponsor and has promised \$150,000. Steve Borkenhagen, executive director of Urban Confluence Silicon Valley, said the group has received key backing from the San Jose City Council, as well as other community groups.



“Our relationship with the city couldn’t be better,” Borkenhagen said. “One reason we’ve gotten to this point is that our board — Jon Ball, Christine Davis and myself — have been constantly communicating with our stakeholders, including the Sharks, Little Italy, the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy, the Sierra Club, and the city’s park’s department. Outreach has been the key to our success.”

Each designer will get a \$150,000 stipend to develop the concepts into workable plans over the next few months, and a final selection will be made by the same jury in the first part of 2021. The city has already approved placing the project in the Arena Green portion of the Guadalupe River Park — a section divided by the confluence of the Guadalupe River and Los Gatos Creek.

Groundbreaking is expected to take place in 2022, and when the landmark structure — which Borkenhagen says will be entirely privately financed — is completed, it will be given to the city of San Jose as a gift. “The park will continue to be accessible to the public,” he said. “We’re not taking anything away from it.”

No matter what design is ultimately built, Ball says the global nature of the submissions is something that San Jose can be proud of. “The fact that we are in San Jose, the urban core of Silicon Valley,” he said, “and have something unique here in the world with our history was something very appealing and somewhat romantic for the jurors.”

